

## A SAXON DWELLING-HOUSE.



## THE HOUSES OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS.

THE current number of the *Art-Journal* contains the first of a series of papers by Mr. Wright on the "Domestic Manners of the English during the Middle Ages," illustrated by Mr. Fairholt, and we glean from it the following particulars of Saxon dwellings. The writer says,—

We have only one record of the manners of the Saxons before they settled in Britain, and that is neither perfect nor altogether unaltered—it is the romance of *Beowulf*, a poem in pure Anglo-Saxon, which contains internal marks of having been composed before the people who spoke that language had quitted their settlements on the Continent. Yet we can hardly peruse it without suspecting that some of its portraiture is descriptive rather of what was seen in England than of what existed in the north of Germany. Thus we might almost imagine that the 'street variegated with stones' (*stret was stān-fih*), along which the hero *Beowulf* and his followers proceeded from the shore to the royal residence of *Hrothgar*, was a description of a Roman road as found in Britain.

It came into the mind of *Hrothgar*, we are told, that he would cause to be built a house, 'a great mead hall,' which was to be his chief palace or metropolis. The hall-gate, we are informed, rose aloft, 'high and curved with pinnacles' (*hroh and horn-geap*). It is elsewhere described as a 'lofty house'; the hall was high; it was 'fast within and without, with iron bonds, forged cunningly'; it appears that there were steps to it, and the roof is described as being variegated with gold; the walls were covered with tapestry (*web æfter wægan*), which also was 'variegated with gold,' and presented to the view 'many a wondrous sight to every one that looketh upon such.' The walls appear to have been of wood; we are repeatedly told that the roof was carved and lofty; the floor is described as being variegated (probably a tessellated pavement); and the seats were benches arranged round it, with the exception of *Hrothgar's* chair or throne. In the vicinity of the hall stood the chambers or bowers, in which there were beds (*bed æfter būm*).

These few epithets and allusions, scattered through the poem, give us a twierable notion of what the house of a Saxon chieftain must have been in the country from whence our ancestors came, as well as afterwards in that where they were finally settled.

The writer considers that this arrangement continued nearly the same down to a late period.

The most important part of the building was the hall, on which was bestowed all the ornamentation of which the builders and decorators of that early period were capable. Around, or near this, stood, in separate build-

ings, the bed-chambers, or bowers (*būr*), of which the latter name is only now preserved, as applied to a summer-house in a garden; but the reader of old English poetry will remember well the common phrase of a bird in bower, a lady in her bower or chamber. These, and the household offices, were all grouped within an inclosure, or outward wall, which, I imagine, was generally of earth, for the Anglo-Saxon word *weall*, applied to an earthen rampart, as well as to masonry. What is termed in the poem of *Judith*, *wealles geat*, the gate of the wall, was the entrance through this inclosure or rampart. I am convinced that many of the earthworks, which are often looked upon as ancient camps, are nothing more than the remains of the inclosures of Anglo-Saxon residences.

We have unfortunately no special descriptions of Anglo-Saxon houses, but scattered incidents in the Anglo-Saxon historians show us that this general arrangement of the house lasted down to the latest period of their monarchy. Thus, in the year 755, *Cynewulf*, king of the West Saxons, was murdered at *Merton* by the atheling *Cyneard*. The circumstances of the story are but imperfectly understood, unless we bear in mind the above description of a house. *Cynewulf* had gone to *Merton* privately, to visit a lady there, who seems to have been his mistress, and he only took a small party of his followers with him. *Cyneard* assembled a body of men, entered the inclosure of the house unperceived (as appears by the context), and surrounded the detached chamber (*būr*) in which was the king with the lady. The king, taken by surprise, rushed to the door (*on þa durn eode*), and was there slain fighting. The king's attendants, although certainly within the inclosure of the house, were out of hearing of this sudden fray (they were probably in the hall), but they were roused by the woman's screams, rushed to the spot, and fought till, overwhelmed by the numbers of their enemies, they also were all slain. The murderers now took possession of the house, and shut the entrance gate of the wall of inclosure, to protect themselves against the body of the king's followers who had been left at a distance. These, next day, when they heard what had happened, hastened to the spot, attacked the house, and continued fighting round the gates (*ymb þa gefu*) until they made their way in, and slew all the men who were there. Again we are told, in the 'Ramsey Chronicle,' published by Gale, of a rich man in the Danish period, who was oppressive to his people, and, therefore, suspicious of them. He accordingly had four watchmen every night chosen alternately from his people, who kept guard at the outside of his hall, evidently for the purpose of preventing his enemies from being admitted into the inclosure by treachery. He lay in his chamber or bower. One night,

the watchmen having drunk more than usual, were unguarded in their speech, and talked together of a plot into which they had entered against the life of their lord. He, happening to be awake, heard their conversation from his chamber, and defeated their project. We see here the chamber of the lord of the mansion so little substantial in its construction that its inmates could hear what was going on out of doors. At a still later period, a Northumbrian noble, whom *Hereward* visited in his youth, had a building for wild beasts within his house or inclosure. One day a bear broke loose, and immediately made for the chamber or bower of the lady of the household, in which she had taken shelter with her women, and whither no doubt the savage animal was attracted by their cries. We gather from the context that this asylum would not have availed them, had not young *Hereward* slain the bear before it reached them. In fact, the lady's chamber was still only a detached room, probably with a very weak door, which was not capable of withstanding any force.

The *Harleian Manuscript*, No. 603 (in the British Museum), contains several illustrations of Anglo-Saxon domestic architecture, most of which are rather sketchy and indefinite; but there is one picture (fol. 57, vo.) which illustrates in a very interesting manner the distribution of the house. Of this an exact copy is given in the accompanying cut.\* The manuscript is perhaps as old as the ninth century, and the picture here given illustrates *Psalm cxi.*, in the Vulgate version, the description of the just and righteous chieftain: the beggars are admitted within the inclosure (where the scene is laid), to receive the alms of the lord; and he and his lady are occupied in distributing bread to them, while his servants are bringing out of one of the bowers raiment to clothe the naked. The larger building behind, ending in a sort of round tower with a cupola, is evidently the hall—the stag's head seems to mark its character. The buildings to the left are chambers or bowers; to the right is the domestic chapel, and the little room attached is perhaps the chamber of the chaplain.

It is evidently the intention in this picture to represent the walls of the rooms as being formed, in the lower part, of masonry, with timber walls above, and all the windows are in the timber walls. If we make allowance for want of perspective and proportion in the drawing, it is probable that only a small por-

\* Strutt has engraved, without indicating the manuscript from which it is taken, a small Saxon house, consisting of one hall or place for living in, with a chamber attached, exactly like the domestic chapel, and its attached chamber in the above cut. This seems to have been the usual shape of small houses in the Anglo-Saxon period.

[We are indebted to the *Art-Journal* for our illustration.]